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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of 639 advertisements in the personals section of one newspaper in order to compare what females and males include in these advertisements. Results indicated that most advertisers described themselves rather than the person they would like to meet but that some differences did occur between male and female generated advertisements. Females were more likely than males to describe their own physical attractiveness and to ask for the psychological characteristics of sensitivity and caring and for financial security. Males were more likely than females to describe their financial security, height, and weight and to request physical descriptions of attractiveness and weight. Males requested a photograph more often than did females. Findings suggested the existence of a profile that represents the traditional U.S. values; men desire attractiveness and women seek financial security. (JHP)

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ADVERTISING FOR A NEW PARTNER STILL SHOWS TRADITIONAL VALUES

by

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[Meyer, Jan]

ADVERTISING FOR A NEW PARTNER STILL SHOWS TRADITIONAL VALUES

When men and women are hoping to meet new potential partners, what is it they're looking for? According to a recent study of 639 ads in the "Personals" section of the Twin Cities Reader, more people describe themselves than the one they'd like to meet. Completed by Dr. Jan Meyer of the College of St. Thomas and her Research Assistant Gwen Pederson, the study found this to be true for both men and women but with some differences.

Women were more likely than men to describe their own general physical attractiveness (such as "blond, blue-eyed"), while men were more likely to describe their own financial security, and specific height and weight. However, in describing the person they'd like to meet, women were more likely to ask for psychological characteristics such as sensitive and caring, along with financial security, while men were more likely to request physical looks such as attractiveness and weight. Men also requested a photo much more often than women.

How did they describe themselves? Most often mentioned for both men and women was age: 88% of the men and 84% of the women listed their own age. Second for both was general attractiveness, for example "blond, blue-eyed, attractive." Third was height, fourth was being financially

secure, fifth was weight, and sixth was psychological characteristics such as "sensitive, caring, sincere." While the order, or preference, in which all of these requirements was the same for both men and women, there was significant difference--more than a 10% spread--between men and women on all but age and psychological characteristics. And, men were more likely than women to mention these characteristics on all but general physical attractiveness.

Fewer of both the men and the women were likely to describe the "desired other," and here there were greater differences between men and women. Most women wanted to meet men who are "sensitive, caring, and sincere"--psychological characteristics--while men most often required physical attractiveness. Second and third on the list of traits desired by women for the men they wanted to meet were age and financial security; for men, second and third was weight and psychological characteristics such as "sensitive, caring, sincere." The greatest differences between men and women were that women wanted men to be financially secure (24% more than men), while men regarded weight as a prime factor (20% more than women did).

Another significant difference between the way men and women "advertise" was found in whether or not they requested a photo of the person responding to their ad.

Almost half (48%) of the men requested a photo, while only 31% of the women did.

What conclusions might be drawn from this? While the people who advertise for new potential partners in the Twin Cities Reader cannot be said to represent the general population at large, they can probably be said to represent the readers of that publication. According to Dr. Meyer, the resultant profile is surprisingly "traditional": men desire looks and women desire financial security. If a medium for such advertising had existed in the '50's, Dr. Meyer feels the outcome of such a study would have been much the same. One glimmer of hope for change can be found, however, in the desired age of the other: the traditional model would be that both men and women would prefer the male in a pair to be older than the female. In this study, however, 36% of the females and 27% of the males suggested the desired other could be younger or older, while only 4% of the women (but none of the men!) wanted the other to be older, and 15% of the men (but none of the women!) wanted the other to be younger.

The study was completed by coding every fourth issue of the Reader from January through May for a total of 393 male-generated ads and 246 female-generated ads. Each ad was coded for description of self and desired other in three headings: finances, physical looks (including height,

weight, attractiveness, and age) and psychological characteristics (such as sensitive, caring, sincere, etc.). Other coding categories included whether or not a photo was requested, the nature of the ad (whether the self only was described, or the other only, or both), and whether or not the ad was written in "cutesy" fashion (for example "Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear looking for...").

This study is one of three completed thus far by Dr. Meyer in what will be a series titled "Women in the 80's." The other two studies are "Are the Funnies Really Funny: The Image of Women as Portrayed in the Comic Strips," and "Having It All: A Study of the Expectations of Three Generations of American Women about Career, Marriage, and Family," completed with Dr. Shirley Polejewski.